

Below are 10 guidelines that will make our reading of Ellen White more profitable and balanced. (A more detailed discussion of this topic can be found in George R. Knight, *Reading Ellen White: How to Understand and Apply Her Writings* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Publishing Assn., 1997).

## 1. FOCUS ON THE CENTRAL ISSUES.

A person can read Ellen White's writings in at least two ways. One is to look for her central themes; the other is to search for those things that are new and different. The first way leads toward an accurate understanding, while the second leads toward distortion of the author's meaning and often toward extremes that Ellen White detested. She herself advocated in Bible study that readers seek to "gain a knowledge" of the Bible's "grand central theme." For her that theme was the plan of redemption and the great controversy between good and evil. "Viewed in the light" of the great central theme of the Bible "every topic has a new significance" (Education, pp. 190, 125).

In short, her counsel was to read for an understanding of the big picture. The big picture then provides the context for interpreting all other issues in terms of both meaning and importance. That principle applies equally to the Bible and Ellen White's writings.

## 2. EMPHASIZE THE IMPORTANT.

In the early twentieth century when some church leaders were using her writings combatively to substantiate certain prophetic points that she believed were of minor importance, Ellen White wrote that "the enemy of our work is pleased when a subject of minor importance can be used to divert the minds of our brethren from the great questions that should be the burden of our message" (Selected Messages, book 1, pp. 164, 165).

## 3. STUDY ALL AVAILABLE INFORMATION ON A TOPIC.

Ellen White's grandson and biographer Arthur White highlighted this issue when he wrote that "many have erred in interpreting the meaning of the testimonies by taking isolated statements or statements out of their context as a basis for belief. Some do this even though there are other passages, which, if carefully

considered, would show the position taken on the basis of the isolated statement to be untenable.”((Arthur L. White, *Ellen G. White: Messenger to the Remnant* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Assn., 1969), p. 88.))

#### **4. AVOID EXTREME INTERPRETATIONS.**

By not following the advice Ellen White gave during her lifetime, some individuals re-create her in their own extremist image. In her own life she tended toward a moderation that is sadly lacking in some who claim to be her faithful followers. For example, some utilize a statement where Ellen White frowned upon ball playing to condemn all such games, whereas she herself wrote that “I do not condemn the simple exercise of playing ball; but this, even in its simplicity, may be overdone” (Adventist Home, p. 499). As in so many situations, Ellen White was a moderate rather than an extremist.

#### **5. TAKE TIME AND PLACE INTO CONSIDERATION.**

Because of change across time and space, it is important to understand the historical context of many of Ellen White’s counsels. One only has to think of her counsel to mid-nineteenth-century women to shorten their dresses eight inches. One could hardly use that quotation as if she had written it in the era of the miniskirt. “Regarding the testimonies,” Ellen White wrote, “nothing is ignored; nothing is cast aside; but time and place must be considered” (Selected Messages, book 1, p. 57). She would repeatedly offer that counsel throughout her ministry.

#### **6. STUDY EACH STATEMENT IN ITS LITERARY CONTEXT.**

People have too often based their understandings of Ellen White’s teachings upon a fragment of a paragraph or an isolated statement entirely removed from its setting. Speaking of the misuse of her writings by some, she wrote that “they quote half a sentence,” they leave “out the other half, which, if quoted, would show their reasoning to be false” (Selected Messages, book 3, p. 82). Again she comments about those who by “separating ... statements from their connection and placing them beside human reasonings, make it appear that my writings uphold that which they condemn” (Letter 208, 1906).

## **7. RECOGNIZE ELLEN WHITE'S UNDERSTANDINGS OF THE IDEAL AND THE REAL.**

Ellen White often provided counsel on the same topic on two levels. The first can be thought of as the ideal. At this level we find statements that allow for no exceptions. An example of this first level is her counsel relating to the ideal that parents should be the “only teachers of their children until they have reached eight or ten years of age” (Testimonies for the Church, vol. 3, p. 137).

On the other hand, when she dealt with situations in the everyday world she often moderated her counsel to fit the needs of real people with real limitations. Thus she moderated her counsel on parents being the “only” teachers by noting that that ideal could hold “if” parents were both able and willing to do the job. If not, young children should be sent to school (Selected Messages, book 3, pp. 215-217).

Ellen White never lost her sense of the ideal, but she was ready to moderate her counsel to meet situations in the real world. One of the plagues of her life were those who collected only the ideal statements and then sought to “drive them upon every one, and disgust rather than win souls” (Selected Messages, book 3, pp. 284-288).

## **8. USE COMMON SENSE.**

Quotations from Ellen White do not solve every problem. Sometimes they just don't fit. When problems came up because some people pushed her statement about parents being the only teachers of their children until 8 or 10 years of age, she responded by claiming that “God desires us to deal with these problems sensibly.” She went on to note that she was stirred up by those who took the attitude that “Sister White has said so and so, and Sister White has said so and so; and therefore we are going right up to it.” Her response to such people was that “God wants us all to have common sense, and He wants us to reason from common sense. Circumstances alter conditions. Circumstances change the relation of things” (Selected Messages, book 3, pp. 215, 217). Her advice was that her readers needed to use common sense even though they might have a quotation from her on the topic.

## **9. DISCOVER THE UNDERLYING PRINCIPLES.**

At the turn of the twentieth century Ellen White wrote that it would be well “if girls ... could learn to harness and drive a horse” (Education, pp. 216, 217). That was practiced in her day, but is of not much use today. However, the principle undergirding that counsel is very important today. That is, young women should be sufficient in transportation. Thus in our day they should be able to drive a car and change a tire. The exact specification of a counsel may change, but the underlying principles have lasting value.

## **10. MAKE SURE ELLEN WHITE SAID IT.**

Many statements are attributed to Ellen White that she never made. The only safe course is to utilize those statements that can be found in her published works or statements from her unpublished writings that can be validated through one of the Ellen White research offices. Many have been led astray by statements attributed to her that she never made.

Ellen White's writings have been a blessing to readers around the world. They will be even more fruitful if they are read with the above guidelines in mind.

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